

The Christian's Desire to be with CHRIST
considered :

I N A
S E R M O N

Occasioned by the Decease of
Mrs. HANNAH BRITTAIN ;

Who departed this Life
NOVEMBER 21, 1754.

Preached at
Horsly-down, Fair-Street, Southwark.

By S A M U E L F R Y.

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PHILIPPIANS I. 23. latter part.

— *Having a desire to depart,
and to be with Christ; which is
far better.*

GOD that made the world, and
all things therein, seeing he is
Lord of heaven and earth, hath
made of one blood all nations of men, for
to dwell on all the face of the earth,
and hath determined the times before ap-
pointed, and the bounds of their habita-
tion, Acts xvii. 24—26. In his hands
are all our affairs, and, as he ushers us
into the World, so he permits our stay-
ing here, or remands us hence, at his
pleasure. For at his Word, *Man goeth
to his long home, and the mourners go
about the streets.* And instances of mor-
tality are so often brought before us,
that the living are daily put in remem-
brance, that they must die. And as this
is a war, from which there can be no dis-

charge ; so the exact period of human life, God has not only wisely, but graciously thought fit to conceal from us ; to prevent, on the one hand, our being attended with dismal horror and confusion of mind ; and, on the other hand, to excite us to such a diligence, in the discharge of the several parts of our duty, as naturally tends to dispose us, and even make us desirous, to depart, *and to be with Christ ; which is far better.* This was, in an eminent degree, the case of our beloved sister *Brittain*, whose death has given occasion to the present discourse.

This epistle is thought to be written by *St. Paul*, when he was prisoner at *Rome*. That he had been in bonds before, may be gathered, from verses 12—14 ; and after he had expressed much affection to the Christians at *Philippi*, and his earnest wishes, that Christ might be magnified in his body, whether by life or by death ; he then gives us a summary account of both, in verses 21, 22. *For, to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live*
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in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour; yet what I shall choose, I wot not. It might be thought, that if death was gain to the Apostle, he would be weary of life, and impatient for death. No, saith he, *if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour*, that is, Christ is the fruit of my labour. He reckoned his labour well bestowed, if he could be instrumental to advance the honour and interest of Christ in the world; to glorify God, and do good to his Church and people: *yet what I shall choose, I wot not*; for says he, *I am in a strait betwixt two.* “It was
 “ a blessed strait, which St. Paul was in,
 “ not between two evil things, but be-
 “ tween two good things. David was
 “ in a strait by three judgments, sword,
 “ famine, and pestilence; St. Paul was
 “ in a strait between two blessings, living
 “ to Christ and being with him.” Now by what follows, and to which I shall confine my discourse at present; we find his inclination was for death, *having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.*

In

In speaking to which words, I shall consider,

I. The subject matter of the Apostle's desire, *to be with Christ; which is far better.*

II. The nature and import of his desire after this advantage.

III. The way in which he expected his desire to be gratified, by departing from the flesh, as appears by verses 22, 24. *If I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: and again, to abide in the flesh, is more needful for you.* But,

I. I am to consider the subject matter of the Apostle's desire *to be with Christ; which is far better.* By Christ, we understand Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the Anointed, and sent of the Father into our World, on the kind and gracious errand of seeking and saving lost
sinful

sinful men. He is called Christ to signify that he was spiritually anointed to the offices of prophet, priest, and king; which were necessary to be performed by the only Mediator between God and man.

The being with Christ, in the sense of the Apostle here, must mean the enjoyment of his glorious presence, in the society of the saints and angels in Heaven. This is indeed the promise, which Christ has made to all his faithful disciples, *John xii. 26. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be.* To be with him, when he was here in poverty and disgrace, would be but mean preferment and low encouragement; and therefore without all question, he means being with him in paradise, sitting in his throne, *Rev. iii. 21*; and it is the happiness of heaven to be there with Christ. The like promise our Lord made to the penitent thief, the day of his death, that he should be with him in paradise. And his is the substance of his prayer, that

all his faithful disciples and followers, may be with him after death. *John xvii. 24. Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.* This shews us, that much of the heavenly state consists in being with Christ, where he now is; in the paradise of God. And he speaks of the happiness of heaven, as if he was already in it, *where I am*; because he was near to it, and sure of it, and it was still upon his heart. And the same joy and glory, which he thought recompence enough for all his services and sufferings, he desires may be the happiness and honour of all true followers of him. They, who keep close to him in the Way, shall be with him in the end. This then is what the Apostle had in view by being with Christ. But who can possibly describe, or even conceive what is contained in the felicity here spoken of. *St. Paul himself says, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart*
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of man the things, which God hath prepared for them that love him. 1 Cor. ii. 9. But in our text, he gives some description of them in brief, when he calls it *being with Christ; which is far better.* Let us then take a short view of this part of the description, *which is far better.* Far better than what? Why *far better* than the injoyment of all the things of time and sense; an happiness consisting in a perfect freedom from all evil, and a full possession and injoyment of all good. We all naturally and necessarily desire to be happy, and to be as happy, as it is possible for us to be; and what can we desire more, as large and as importunate as our desires are, than to be intirely free from all labour and toil, danger and disappointment, pain and sorrow, anxiety and discontent, and especially the worst of evils, sinning against God; and to injoy constant ease and repose, undisturbed peace, safety and satisfaction? Surely this must be far better than it possibly can be with us here in this present world. And that this is truly the

state of real christians, in the future world, is evident from the consideration of three things among others, that this happiness is certain, complete, and eternal.

1. It is certain. All sublunary enjoyments are uncertain as to our having them, as well as to their duration and continuance; for we know not what our lot or portion may be here, whether prosperity or adversity will attend us. Time and chance happens to all men; and if the sun now shines on our tabernacles, yet we know not how soon a cloud with a storm may dash our pleasing hopes and prospects to pieces. But the happiness of the people of God, the kingdom they shall possess, cannot be shaken; and therefore their hope is said to be, *both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the vail, whether the forerunner is for them entered, even Jesus.* Heb. vi. 20. This happiness indeed is future, but it is also certain and real. The mansions of bliss are prepared, and laid up for them in heaven, and they who are
true

true believers, are the purchase of the blood of Christ, and have the promise, nay, oath of a faithful God and Father, making this state of future happiness absolutely secure to them. The pleasure they enjoy in the christian practice, gives them an agreeable foretaste of their expected happiness in heaven. They experience, that the yoke of Christ is easy, and his burthen light indeed ; that by living in conformity to his precepts and example, they possess more solid peace and satisfaction within, than all the sensual pleasures of this world can afford. The more confirmed they are, and the greater proficiency they make in the christian life, the sweeter, in proportion, will be their self-enjoyment, and the stronger their hope in God. They count the pleasure they have in doing his will an ample reward of their services, though there were no other to be expected ; and would not wish to be excused from observing any one of his commandments, even the most difficult of them : because the more they deny themselves for his sake, the greater

assurance they have of their own sincerity, and of their interest in the favour of God, through the Redeemer. Their perseverance in the christian life, and nearer approach to the glorious recompence of reward set before them daily give new life to their hopes ; their increasing pleasures are an earnest of their future inheritance, and confirm their right to the glory graciously promised in the gospel to them, who love God, and obey the gospel of his Son. And this sure prospect of future blessedness it is, which fills the Mind with exulting joy and pleasure ; and if the belief and certain expectation of this gives us a joy unspeakable, and full of glory ; what soul ravishing pleasures will that state afford ? For,

2. As it is certain, so it will be complete. The retirement of christians, from this world to the grave, is only for an appointed time. And as our blessed Saviour assures us, *Mat. x. 28.* that they *which kill the body, are not able to kill the soul*, we have reason to conclude, that the souls of the righteous are happy in the separate state ;

that they reflect with pleasure on their conduct in this world, and chearfully hope for the completion of their happiness at the resurrection of the just ; that they adore and enjoy God more perfectly than they could do, when they were incumbered with these mortal bodies. And when the blessed Jesus comes again, the bodies of the saints will be raised and pass through that glorious and happy change, which is so excellently described by St. Paul. 1 Cor. 42—44. *It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption ; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory ; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power ; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.* And being fashioned like to the glorified body of Christ, it will be again inhabited by the pure, immortal Spirit. How joyful will this union be ! Thus happily united again, they will enter with their blessed Redeemer into the glorious mansions above, where they will be placed far above all temptations, enjoy an immunity from all evils, and possess a happiness inconceivably greater than their highest expectations. The spiritualized body

dy will be ~~ble~~ssed with continual health, ease and vigour, with never fading youth and beauty. The refined organs will convey to the mind none but agreeable sensations, and always delight it with the most harmonious sounds, and the most charming sights. It will bear with ease the most intense thought and contemplation, and perform the exercises of the heavenly state, and execute the orders of the soul with unwearied sprightliness and vigour. The rational faculties of the blessed will be improved beyond what we can at present conceive; so that they will never err, but have a perfect discernment of those things, which they could not here comprehend. They will know, as they are known; and will view, and review the perfections of God, displayed in the works of creation, and the acts of his providence, especially in those which concerned themselves, and their own times, with inexpressible and increasing pleasure. Their pious habits will be improved into perfect holiness; and the pleasures they had in doing good, center in eternal joys: For they will ever live in the blissful presence

sence of God, where there is the fulness of joy, and pleasures for evermore. With what unspeakable delight will they behold their glorified Saviour, and view the gracious scheme of their redemption by him in all its parts? Who can conceive the joy they will feel, when they enter into the general assembly of angels and saints; and there meet their pious friends, from whom they shall never more be parted; but with them injoy inconceivable pleasures, and sing the praises of the great God and their gracious Redeemer to all eternity. Nothing can ever possibly happen in their blessed abodes, to impair, interrupt, or put an end to their happiness; for it is represented by *a kingdom which cannot be moved; an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.* It will be immutable, though it may, I presume, admit of a gradual increase by fresh communications of knowledge and happiness from the inexhaustible fountain of all good.

3. That, which crowns all, is the eternity of their happiness. Then will the joy

joy of the christian remain, as well as be complete. What gives a pain and an unspeakable uneasiness to the wicked, adds a pleasure and delight to the godly soul; that the worm never dies with the one, and the crown never fades with the other; for then will the glory, honour, and happiness of the christians be lasting, as their desires, as their souls; nay, as their God, who himself will be the *strength of their hearts, and their portion for ever*. Psalm lxxiii 26. And is not this far better then to be on earth? Observe what the Apostle says of it in 2 Cor. iv. 17. He calls it, *a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*. When we go about to think much more to speak of eternity, how soon are we at a loss, and how quickly are our imaginations tired? How soon do our tongues falter, for the waves of this mighty ocean presently overcharge us? The most eloquent orator soon finds this subject too great, too sublime for all language to describe. When we have thought on it to the utmost, and have ranged together a numberless train of pleasing conceptions

ceptions and ideas, we shall still find something remaining vastly beyond our reach; which will oblige us to sit down, and say, it is a knowledge too wonderful for us; but yet reason teaches us, that it may be, and Revelation assures us, that it is so. Nothing can act before it is, and therefore cannot make itself; but must be beholden to some other being, which is therefore superior to it, and is eternal, from everlasting to everlasting; which can only be said of God, *Who, in this respect, only hath immortality*, 1 Tim. vi. 16. But when we speak of eternity, respecting creatures, we conceive of it, as that which had a beginning, but shall have no end; and such shall the happiness of the saints in the future world be. What words then can set forth this matter in a clear light to our view? We often mention the days of eternity, and yet when thousands, millions of thousands of years are gone and past, eternity is the same. And this is what is included in being with Christ. It is an happiness certain, complete, and eternal. Justly may this be said to be far better than

all the enjoyments of time and sense. And this leads me,

II. To consider the nature and import of the Apostle's desire to enjoy this state of future happiness. *Having a desire, &c.* Now this desire we may rationally suppose to be attended with some peculiar and special properties, some of which I will mention.

I. A desire to be with Christ includes and discovers a superior love and affection to him. And it is plain, that such a love to the blessed Jesus reigned eminently in the heart of this Apostle. Now where such a love prevails, there will be a desire of society with the beloved object. Love is an affection of the soul, and it is the strongest affection; it is as the great wheel, setting all the rest in motion; and desire follows after, and what I love, I desire to enjoy; for where there is not a desire of society, there true love is not to be found. After this manner it was with the Psalmist, *Psalm lxxiii. 25. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. Psalm xlii. 1. As the hart*
panteth

panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. And in Psalm cxxx.

6. My soul waiteth for the Lord; more than they that watch for the morning. These, and many other such sayings, shew the strength of his affection. And whereas God is pleased to manifest himself in a gracious way and manner in some places, and in some exercises, there is a special kind of fellowship had with Christ in them. Accordingly we find the saints have had a great desire after these places and these duties. Thus *David* saith, *Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth.* Psalm xxvi. 8. Again Psalm xxvii.

4. One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple. Now where there is such a desire after the injoyment of the glorious presence of God, and Christ in heaven, as is expressed by the Apostle in the text; there is a desire after society in a gracious way and manner here on earth.

2. This desire shews itself by a noble contempt of this world, and reckoning no more from it, than those who are strangers and pilgrims: as the author of the epistle to the *Hebrews* reasons, concerning the antient worthies, *Heb. xi. 13.—16.* *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly if they had been mindful of that country, from whence they came out, they might have had an opportunity to have returned; but now they desire a better country, that is an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he hath prepared for them a City. Upon the same principle it was, that Moses acted, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompence of reward. verses 25, 26.* Such persons see much
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of the vast difference there is between the present and future world; and therefore, with good reason, prefer the future before the present, desiring it sincerely, fervently, and above all; and the more they see of it, the more strong and fervent their desires after it will be. They are risen with Christ, and therefore *seek those things which are above; where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.* Their lives are hid with Christ in God, and their conversation therefore is in heaven. They are denizens there, and to what should their most ardent desires tend, but to the enjoyment of their proper home, to be with Christ?

3. These desires are accompanied with persevering indeavours, in the use of all proper means, to attain a suitable meetness and disposition to enjoy the happiness I have hinted at. In the general, they are, by the grace and Spirit of God, formed for this heavenly state; they are born from above, and have a godlike nature, an incorruptible seed dwelling in them, as a prevailing principle. But while they are in this world, this divine principle

principle is maintained, and kept alive in the use of appointed means : Such as reading, hearing, meditating on the word of God, attending on his positive Institutions, and ingaging in all the required Acts of devotion both in private and publick. After all, it must be remembered, that many imperfections are found in the best and choicest of the people of God ; that their present state is a state of trial and probation ; so that while they are in the body, it will be found necessary for them to watch and pray, fighting and striving against all their spiritual enemies ; and after all to look unto, and depend upon the infinite mercy of God, through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ, for everlasting life and happiness. Now the means before-mentioned, are very effectual in the hands of the blessed Spirit, to accomplish those ends ; to beget and preserve a proper meetness and disposition for the exercises and injoyments of the future and better world. This the christian has experienced, and therefore uses these means constantly, and perseveres therein unto the end of life.

4. Where

4. Where there is this desire towards Christ, there will be expressed on suitable occasions, an high esteem of him, and a becoming regard for his honour and interest. This desire will shew itself by an esteem and value of the desired object, and a due regard to whatsoever tends to promote the reputation of this Saviour; so that in a word, this takes in all our works, and actions, according to the general temper and disposition of the mind; for desire is so near a-kin to love, as has been already shewn, that it chearfully exerts itself in all acts of obedience. The same, which is said of love, may be said of desire. It can hardly deny any work, which the party beloved and desired enjoins. Our blessed Saviour makes this a rule of trial. *John xiv. 15. If you love me, keep my commandments.* And again, *He that bath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me, ver, 21.* In another place he says, *Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you, John xv. 14.* Now as love and desire make persons dutiful, so do they in like manner make them

them bountiful and liberal; for where the heart is enlarged, there the hand will not be straitened; and let it be observed, that where a soul, in sincerity gives itself up to God, and Christ, it makes a solemn surrender of its all. Self-denial, as it is the first lesson to be learned by a christian, so it is what he must practise to the end of his race. And where this disposition of mind prevails, there is a readiness, upon all proper calls, to part with what is necessary for the honour and interest of Christ. If *Mary's* tears will be accepted to wash her Saviour's feet, she will pour them out freely, and not think her hair too good to wipe them with. No spikenard shall be too costly for him, whom her soul affects; no, though the ointment might be sold for some great sum of money, *Luke vii. 38. John xii. 3*: yet she had rather bestow it on her dear Lord, than on herself; and that, because she so much loved and desired him. There was but one thing which checked our Apostle's desires to depart, and to be with Christ, and that was the honour of Christ in this world,

and

and the good of the Church. And this is the case of all true believers in him, who is unto them all, and in all. I proceed now

III. To the last general head, or the way in which the Apostle expected his desires of being with Christ to be gratified. And this was by departing; by which we must understand his departure out of this world by death, which is a separation of the soul from the body; that the one may be reduced to its original dust, and the other return to him, who is the great and glorious creator of all things. We consider this place therefore, as a strong proof tending to confirm us in the belief of the immortality of the soul.

It is true some say, "The time, between death and the resurrection, is not to be reckoned; therefore the Apostle might speak thus, though the soul hath no sense of any thing after death." "But, as the learned Dr. *Whitby*

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notes,

“ notes, could St. *Paul* think a state of
 “ insensibility much better than a life
 “ tending so much, as his did, to the glo-
 “ ry of God, to the propagation of the
 “ gospel, and the furtherance of the joy
 “ of christians? Could he call such an in-
 “ sensate state, *a being with Christ*, and
 “ *a walking by sight*, in opposition to the
 “ life of faith?” 2 Cor. v. 7, 8. Others
 say, the Apostle was in a strait betwixt
 two, whether he should choose that life,
 which would enable him to gain many
 souls to Christ, and minister greatly to
 the necessity of the church; or that, in
 which he should live with Christ; because
 he expected the day of judgment, and con-
 sequently the general resurrection, would
 be in his time.

But neither will the words bear this sense;
 for “ it is impossible, that the same man,
 “ at the same time, should expect the re-
 “ surrection, and the day of judgment,
 “ and yet expect to live in the flesh, and
 “ to abide with the church in the flesh,
 “ when none of the members of the church
 “ should abide in the flesh, but should in-
 joy

“ joy that resurrection, [or rather that glorious change, which the righteous will undergo, who are alive at the appearance of Christ,] “ which would place them with “ Christ, as well as himself. That he “ should desire, that his soul should be “ separated from the body, that he might “ be present with the Lord ; and yet at “ the same time expect that day, in which “ he should be cloathed upon with his celestial body.” This is inconsistent, for his abiding in the flesh supposes, that he did not suddenly expect the resurrection, and the general judgment. And besides, this would produce a removal both in body and soul, whereas it appears by the connection in which the words of our text stand, that when he speaks of a departure, he means a departure from the flesh ; so that this departure, I think, must include a separation between soul and body, and of this, we have St. Paul plainly speaking in 2 Cor. v. 6, 7, 8. *Therefore we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord : (for we walk by faith, not by sight*

fight) we are confident I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and present with the Lord. It is not desirable in itself to be unclothed, as the Apostle calls our 'change by death; in the fore-cited place, ver. 4. Death, considered merely as a separation between soul and body, is not to be desired, but dreaded rather; but considered as a passage to glory, the believer is willing rather to die, than to live; to leave this body to go to Christ, and to put off these rags of mortality, and put on robes of glory. I might alledge other places of Scripture, which give us the same ideas of the nature of death; but time forbids me at present.

Thus I have gone through the heads I proposed, by considering the subject matter of the Apostle's desire to be with Christ; the nature and import of that desire including a contempt of this world, with several other properties; and the way in which he expected these desires should be

be gratified, by dying. I shall now conclude with some brief remarks. And,

1. What a vain life is that of a sinner? It promises much, but performs little. It speaks fair, but is very deceitful; *for he that soweth iniquity, shall reap vanity. He that soweth to his flesh, shall of the flesh, reap corruption.*

2. We have the highest reason to be in love with religion, and to govern ourselves by her rules; because she lays the safest, nay, the only foundation for a comfortable death, besides all the real pleasures she gives us in this life, and the cheering hopes of a blessed and glorious immortality in the world to come.

3. It is no wonder, that true christians are not only willing, but desirous to die; since death to them will be of so great gain, bringing them to Christ, to see and enjoy him as he is.

4. If to be with Christ is far better, this should thoroughly reconcile us to the parting

parting with our nearest relations, and dearest friends, of whom we have good hope through grace, that they sleep in Jesus, as we trust our sister, lately taken from us, does ; of whom much may be said, but I shall only hint some things with the greatest brevity. She had a sober and religious education ; was convinced of the want and worth of Christ betimes, and devoted herself to God, in her youth, in the gospel way. She has ever since walked, as becomes the christian character, valuing the day of the Lord, the house and ordinances of God. Nor did she rest here, but, as I am informed, made conscience of private devotion, and indeavoured by this duty to keep up daily communion with her Lord, and Head. Her faith was fixed on the right foundation, on the mercy of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, whose precious blood cleanseth from all sin ; and therefore she bore the afflictions she laboured under with christian fortitude, patience, and resignation ; and the nearer she advanced towards the close of her life, the more the

the inner man seemed to be renewed and comforted ; till at last, before she was aware, she departed to be with Christ. And what can I say to you, her mourning friends, and nearest relations, on this occasion ; but what she herself said, instead of grieving, *Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again, I say rejoice.* Labour to imitate her example, and if, through the frailty of human nature, any thing amiss has been observed, shun that, and follow her in whatsoever is commendable and praise worthy. As to you, my dear brother, her surviving husband, it is true you have lost an affectionate, obliging, and virtuous wife, others a loving sister, others a faithful friend, the fatherless a mother, those near in habitation a courteous neighbour, the servants a good mistress, the church a worthy and honourable member, and the world a real christian : Upon all which considerations, the advice she gave, to rejoice even under this dispensation of providence, appears to be well grounded, for they, who depart in Christ, reap infinite advantage.

5. Let this put us all upon a serious examination into our own state and condition. In what preparation do we stand for death, and all its awful consequences? If we find we are, through grace, habitually ready to die, yet let us labour to be actually so; that being found in such a state, we may not only be willing, but even desirous to depart, and be with our great and glorious Lord, and Head, which will be also our unspeakable gain.

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